

We were going past a slew of signs telling us that the Safari Park was coming up, decorated garishly with friendly elephants, cheeky monkeys and sinister looking lions caught mid snarl, and then we were there. There was a longish drive up to the pay booths and no-one else around. Autumnal weekdays in term time were clearly quiet.

There was a sallow youth in the pay booth, tall greasy with long unkempt hair, slightly spotty and able to convey disinterest without really trying. I had the window down before I caught his attention.

'How much?' I asked.

'Depends what you want,' he replied slowly.

'Everything,' I said, 'all the bits where you can go in the car.'

'That's £40 then,' he said. 'If you really want everything.' Clearly, many of his clients negotiated their way out of various enclosures. 'You get some food as well, he added, for the monkeys,' as if to make the offer more exciting.

'Fine,' I said peeling two twenty pound notes off the bankroll in my pocket. 'We're in a hurry,' I added. He looked impressed for the first time bustling around the ticket machine and passing over some elaborate bits of card. 'You can only go in an enclosure once, follow the signs and do as they say, no reversing and don't get out of the car. If you break down, use your horn.'

'Yes,' I said, 'of course,' and then the barrier lifted and we were inside. There was a fork in the road, one way to Shop and Restaurant and the other to Monkey Jungle.

'Which one?' asked Ben.

'Monkeys,' I said confidently. I knew my parents well enough to know that the shop and the restaurant, gifts and snacks, would be deferred until the end of the visit. All we had to do was go round until we caught up with them. They'd be here somewhere given their likely start time.

'We just have to go round and catch up with them,' I said.

'Might be easier said than done,' answered Ben as the gates to Monkey Jungle opened.

The monkey's usual fun was to jump onto slow moving cars and helpfully remove anything loose, targeting windscreen wipers and aerials. They were not prepared for us moving at speed and weaving through the traffic.

'For God's sake, don't kill one,' I called out. 'The RSPCA will be on to us.'

'Think of them as rats,' he replied.

The monkey horde approached the car hopefully and in numbers. This looked to be the kind of vehicle where everything might be slightly loose. Windscreen sealer, window blades and number plates would all be susceptible to tiny agile monkey fingers. They were expecting a treat, approaching like baboons with their tails in the air, ready to pounce and they must have been surprised when Ben's car swerved past a row of much newer cars festooned with monkeys and full of giggling people.

Fortunately, we didn't take any of them with us, the monkeys that is, as Ben gunned towards the exit slowing down slightly as we reached it to avoid antagonising some kind of safari guard in a Land Rover. We needn't have bothered - he appeared to be asleep and the gate opened automatically.

We were now in a stretch of open country and the road, although well-made, was narrow running along the side of a slope. Presumably, this was a buffer area to stop the monkeys being too worried about the lions or maybe to stop the lions from salivating too much at the thought of juicy monkeys. As a result, the road curved around as if it was idly crossing some northern moor. Ben seemed to appreciate that we had to pass as many cars as possible in order to find my parents but the drivers, being solidly British seemed to take this as some kind of personal insult. We got past the first few cars with ease but the next one evidently took the view that he had a place in line and might miss his place or perhaps he thought we would distract the elephants. Anyway, he deliberately took the middle line, occupying the highest point of the road riding an invisible white line.

It was probably the stress of the moment but I think perhaps Ben did the wrong thing. He flashed his headlights. At this, the man in front - I was sure it was a man - in some large German car chose to slow down rather than to pull politely to the side and let us pass. Ben flashed his lights again and the car in front slowed more. Perhaps the driver had had a hard time in Monkey Jungle or maybe the experience wasn't living up to expectations but I got the feeling he might be cross.

'Careful Ben,' I said, 'there'll be a chance to get past him further on.'

'Hold on,' he answered and promptly swerved up the slope and onto the rough pasture. It was fine for Land Rovers but not the surface of choice for us. The car bumped and banged roughly as Ben accelerated to overtake. As we pulled alongside the other car, the driver looked across at me and did a good impression of a snarl. He was fat, red-faced wearing glasses and sat next to a scowling woman in a coat staring straight ahead impassively. The driver mouthed something. It looked rude and then Ben was in front bouncing back on to the road the suspension clattering angrily.

Of course, because we were British this now had to turn into a race. As Ben sped up so did the car behind and being a product of the mighty German motorcar revival it was likely to have more horsepower than we did. We made for the elephant enclosure at speed. The entrance was guarded by a set of double gates so it was necessary to enter a kind of airlock where one gate closed behind before the one in front opened. As we pulled through the first gates so did our pursuer. If this had been the A12 I'm sure he would have been out of his car banging on our door and shouting, full of rightful indignation and rage but there were lots of notices saying that getting out of the car was forbidden and dangerous. I thought that it might be a good idea to turn round helpfully and smile apologetically but that was clearly the wrong thing to do as all I got in return were raised fingers on both hands and what, even with my limited lip-reading skills, were clearly expletives.

'He's cross,' I said to Ben with my capacity for understatement. Ben just sniggered.

'Fuck him,' he said. I realised that he was a man too. If Gregory had been in his position, I would probably have sympathised with the man behind. We came up behind him too fast, flashed our lights and swerved past boy racer style. We were in the wrong but, today, I realised that I enjoyed Ben's reaction. I was glad he had not made apologetic gestures, mimed how sorry he was and waved

the big car through. Maybe things were getting to me and in this new world. I liked the idea of two hulks facing up to each other and mine being in front!

This was a short lived chain of thought so I did not have time to regret it. The gates in front opened and we were off. Of course, it is one thing to scatter a few monkeys and to push your way past a line of cars but quite another when elephants and rhinoceroses are involved. The notices advised people not to stop but to drive slowly. Ben ignored the second part of this advice which seemed reasonable at the time since the elephants and a solitary rhino were well away in the middle distance but then the road curved around and we were coming back towards them, going too fast. There was a line of cars and three or four elephants, smaller and hairier than in the pictures but still pretty big. There must have been some kind of feeding station to attract them to where the cars went by or perhaps one of the drivers had a bag of illicit buns to feed them. Ben put his foot on the brake and the car stopped but there was a bit of a squeal and he then started to manoeuvre his way through the herd. What I hadn't noticed before was that the main attraction here was a young elephant which was playing up to the cars and ambling between its mother's legs. It was a sweet sight and no wonder the cars had slowed and queued but there was no sign of mum and dad in the line. Ben eased around to the outside of the line of cars between them and the elephants. There was a smaller space but it was certainly possible to drive through.

I think we would have been fine if he hadn't hooted as the last car in the line decided it would be nice to be closer to the elephants and eased across the road. I'm sure it wasn't deliberate and they were just getting a better view. The car pulled back in and we were through. Well, almost, apart from a much larger elephant straight ahead in the road with big tusks and its ears flapping and out at the sides. It did not look happy. Maybe the hoot was some kind of insult or challenge in elephant language. Ben stopped, so did the elephant beady eyes sharply focused on the car. It was a classic stand-off.

'I don't like the look of this,' I said.

'Me neither,' replied Ben. I think he had met his match.

The stand-off ended suddenly. A camouflage coloured land rover was quickly between us and the elephant, swerving in from off road. The elephant saw it before we did and shied away turning off the road in the other direction. The land rover followed but not before the driver caught my eye and held his finger to his lips and indicated by raising and lowering his hand that we should shut up and slow down. I nodded and made what I hoped were small apologetic waves and then Ben was off again, foot down heading for the lions not taking the slightest notice.

'They must be here somewhere,' he said.

'They will be,' I answered. 'We just have to catch them up.'

We did just that, but maybe not in the best place.

The lion enclosure in a safari park is probably not the ideal place to meet your parents and kids after they have had a day out. In fact, it may be one of the worst. As we drove in through the double wire gates there were constant notices about keeping windows closed, driving sensibly and never getting out of your car. The repeated mantra was that lions can be very dangerous!

To be honest, they didn't really look the part. A lot of them looked slightly mangy, lounging a few yards away from the roadside as if even the odd succulent pedestrian wouldn't tempt them to get their feet. They eyed the passing cars with deadpan faces. Occasionally, one or two would get to their feet and with a slow wobbling gait move to join another group. There was the odd cuff of a paw and some indeterminate grooming taking place but not much else.

Wherever there was a group of animals there was a slow line of cars, either stopped or moving very slowly. It was relatively easy for Ben to drive around them without causing offence so we made good progress and, then, in the distance I saw my mum and dad's Austen in a shade of pale creamy green which meant they got it for rather less than it should have been.

'There they are,' I said, 'in the next group of cars. They must have stopped to look at a lion.'

As we came up to join the group, I saw that the 'main' attraction was in place. It was a big male lion standing shotgun over three or four females and, of course, a group of cubs frolicking around the lionesses. It seemed a fairly harmless gathering and attractively photogenic to the gawping families in their cars. The Austen was at the far end of a line of cars and I don't think Ben won any prizes in the popularity stakes by driving in front of the others and jumping the queue as it were. He didn't please the big male lion either. It didn't look too happy at having the happy family scene interrupted by someone driving a little too fast and a little too close.

It wasn't easy to attract the kids' attention as we pulled up alongside my dad's car. They didn't recognise Ben or his car and I was in the passenger side so I had to lean I front of him waving and making faces while my family was still staring at the lions cavorting lazily quite close to the car.

'Wind the window down Ben,' I said. 'Then they'll hear.'

'You sure,' he asked.

'Yes, shout at them!'

At around this point, James noticed me, waved back and evidently said something to my parents who looked across at me in a mixture of surprise and shock. I could see my mum mouthing, 'It's Alison' to my dad.

I gesticulated to my mum to wind the window down and shouted across. 'Hello, mum, I've got to talk to you; we're in a bit of a hurry.'

My mum was still opening the window. 'What,' she said. 'Now?'